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GLOBAL INNOVATIONS

Enhancing nutrition action through accountability and transparency

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Poor diet and malnutrition in all its forms are among the greatest global health, equity and societal challenges of our time. It is estimated that 11 million adults die each year from diet-related diseases (GNR, 2021). Around 150 million children are stunted and 45 million are wasted thanks to both chronic and acute undernutrition during the first five years of life (GNR, 2021). At the same time, overweight and obesity afflict 2.2 billion adults and 38.9 million children under five years of age around the globe (GNR, 2021).

This double burden of malnutrition – the coexistence of undernutrition and diet-related chronic diseases – is the top cause of poor health in the world, especially in low- and middle-income countries (Popkin, Corvalan and Grummer-Strawn, 2020). Moreover, the double burden is most prevalent in the poorest regions of the world, such as sub-Saharan Africa and southeast Asia and the Pacific (Popkin, Corvalan and Grummer-Strawn, 2020).

National governments, multilateral organizations and the leaders of the Group of Seven (G7) industrialized nations have called for more action, stronger governance and greater accountability in addressing these nutritional challenges to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 2 (SDG 2, Zero Hunger), SDG 3 (good health and well-being) and the global nutrition targets set by the World Health Assembly (see, for example, G7, 2021; Nutrition for Growth Summit, n.d.). With the worsening impacts of poor diet and climate change, the need for more nutritious, equitable, resilient and sustainable food and health systems has never been more urgent.

The current challenges facing countries with high rates of food insecurity will increase even further as the ongoing war in Ukraine drives up food and fuel prices and threatens humanitarian aid to the most vulnerable. At the same time, rates of obesity, diabetes and other diet-related diseases continue to rise in every nation in the world. This decade must be a turning point for all stakeholders that can have an impact on nutrition – including, but not limited to, governments, international and multilateral organizations, philanthropic organizations, the private sector and civil-society actors – to drive action and collaboration to win the fight against poor diet and malnutrition.

Born of the first Nutrition for Growth (N4G) Summit in 2013, the Global Nutrition Report (GNR) has been tracking the progress made by countries and other key actors around the world on meeting the N4G commitments to improve nutrition (GNR, n.d.). To support the shared goals of ending poor diet and malnutrition in all its forms, the GNR has built on its existing tools to create a robust accountability platform to monitor nutrition actions based on common principles, methods and approaches: the Nutrition Accountability Framework (NAF) (Micha, Karageorgou and

Figure 1. The NAF: A global accountability framework for nutrition action

SOURCE: Micha, R., Karageorgou, D. & Wu, J. 2021. About the Nutrition Accountability Framework. In: *Global Nutrition Report*. Bristol, UK: Development Initiatives. https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/naf/about/

Wu, 2021). The NAF will become the primary global public resource for tracking progress on nutrition commitments. The transparency provided by the NAF creates a continuous learning process that enables stakeholders to identify, refine and steer priority nutrition actions to address changing needs at national, regional and global level.

The need for SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound) commitments has long been recognized as essential (GNR, 2017). However, clear criteria for assessing the SMARTness of nutrition commitments have been missing. The NAF addresses these gaps by defining common principles for monitoring, while also ensuring that nutrition commitments are SMART. The full cycle of the NAF includes (1) formulating and registering SMART commitments, (2) reporting on progress annually, and (3) planning and taking further action where needed (Figure 1).

The NAF was launched in September 2021 as the formal accountability mechanism for the Tokyo Nutrition for Growth Summit that took place in December 2021. This is the first time that accountability for nutrition commitments was prioritized, and the NAF facilitated the formulation and registration of SMART N4G commitments. At the Summit, the NAF recorded 396 new nutrition commitments made by 181 stakeholders from 78 countries (Nutrition for Growth Summit, 2021).

How the NAF helps to strengthen accountability

A fundamental principle of working with a wide range of stakeholders is to ensure that the process and reporting system is transparent and that members are accountable for the data provided and reported. Endorsed by key stakeholders – the government of Japan, the Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement, the World Health Organization, the United Nations Children's Fund, the United States Agency for International Development and others – the NAF is designed to ensure that a transparent accountability system is in place.

With commitment data available online and visible to pledgers and the public, alongside a unified approach to registration, the dissemination of commitments and progress increases the general understanding of accountability among stakeholders. Thus, the NAF bolsters accountability by creating an enabling environment in which stakeholders have a common language and can cooperate to address malnutrition around the globe by holding each other to account. What's more, the fact that all NAF data are managed by the GNR Independent Expert Group, in line with the NAF values of transparency and excellence, increases trust in the data.

On the topic of data, the NAF also builds trust among stakeholders by asking all commitment makers to use the NAF to encourage transparency in the nutrition community across sectors and beyond Nutrition for Growth. The Dalai Lama once said that "a lack of transparency results in distrust and a deep sense of insecurity" (Nelson, 2012). The NAF's fundamental principle of transparency aims to help build trust among different stakeholders across sectors.

How to improve accountability and transparency in nutrition actions

To address the complex issue of malnutrition in all its forms, a transparent, consistent and systematic approach to stakeholder accountability is essential. To date, there has been lack of global accountability for most nutrition actions, including programmes, investments and interventions, be they led by governments, the private sector or civil-society actors. There has also been insufficient cross-stakeholder communication and trust.

To address this, action is needed to promote accountability on a broader scale and improve information-sharing and trust among stakeholders. By recording nutrition commitments and establishing common principles for monitoring global nutrition accountability, the NAF aims to become the primary public resource for tracking progress on nutrition commitments (GNR, n.d.).

The NAF allows diverse stakeholders, including national governments, civil society and the private sector, to make SMART, public commitments to address nutrition. Transparency allows stakeholders and the public to understand how the NAF is built and the extent to which stakeholders are addressing nutrition issues. Through the NAF, key gaps in knowledge can be identified and action to close such gaps can become possible through shared knowledge and integrated reporting by all who follow it.
As presented above, the NAF is designed to support stakeholders in defining and shaping commitment goals in a transparent, consistent and systematic manner (Figure 1). The NAF is also a key component in addressing malnutrition in all its forms by identifying shortfalls in action and knowledge on best practices or approaches to reducing the prevalence of the double burden of malnutrition.

For example, the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of global food systems have been widely exposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine, including supply-chain problems, reduced production, the transport of food within and across borders, and the strong interlinkages of diet-related diseases and poor outcomes from the pandemic. Yet, as witnessed during the pandemic, food aid and vaccines against COVID-19 were distributed in an unequal manner, both between and within nations, exacerbating existing inequalities in health and disease. These gaps are not always obvious at the start of a crisis, but can become more predictable once data are available. The NAF has the potential to provide such critical data, enabling stakeholders to be prepared.

This renders the NAF an even more timely and essential tool that has the potential to encourage and promote communication by creating a space for stakeholders to access data that can be used for communication and cooperation across the many sectors of the food, nutrition and health communities. Moreover, the NAF has immense potential to support stakeholders working across food systems in providing coherent and transparent goals that can be used to better understand how potential disruptions may impact nutrition. Using the NAF will then allow for reporting and monitoring of these actions to address both undernutrition and diet-related diseases (Micha, Karageorgou and Wu, 2021).

Conclusions

To achieve the SDGs, Member Nations and diverse national and multinational stakeholders must address poor diets and malnutrition in all its forms. Success requires specific goals, transparency and accountability. The NAF provides an open, consistent approach to stakeholder accountability, incorporating SMART commitments, annual reporting on progress, and further actions and planning. This platform has enormous potential to support stakeholders working in different sectors in creating innovations and disruptions to achieve a nutritious, equitable and sustainable food system.

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